National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCPP)

Listening Session Report

Overview

Participant feedback from NCPP's eight listening sessions has provided leadership with a more comprehensive picture of the current opportunities and needs related to conservation planning overall. More than 450 questions and comments were received from over 1,035 listening session participants, which included employees, producers, conservation district supervisors and other partners from across the nation.

In this report, the raw comments were broken down into 12 categories and condensed into short summaries that capture the most prevalent themes. Please access the unabbreviated version of the questions and comments at: NCPP Listening Session Feedback;

NCPP Listening Session FAQs-All States

Comment Categories

Participant feedback is categorized into the following topic areas:

- Communications
- Access to NRCS Tools and Information
- Changes in Programs and Processes
- Training and Mentoring
- Work Load/Efficiencies
- Conservation Planning Designation Requirements
- Job Approval Authority (JAA)
- Tools and Technologies
- Quality Assurance
- Policy
- Tribal Connection
- Additional Producer Feedback

Next Steps

The NCPP committee chairs held a three-day work session on May 20-22, 2019, to review all listening session feedback and develop a plan of action to address as many of these challenges, concerns and opportunities as possible.

The major takeaways and next steps from the work session include the following:

- The team determined conservation planning, capacity and training as the highest priorities in screening and ranking the recommendations.
- The recommendations were broken down into four main areas:
  1) Just Do It Projects (recommendations that can move forward immediately)
  2) Recommended Projects (recommendations identified as priority for action and implementation)
  3) Recommendations that need further exploration
  4) Items that are out of the partnership's scope of work
- Next steps include developing work plans and timelines for the above recommended projects, identifying and securing resources needed to accomplish goals, and communicating about the projects to all employees.
- A process will be developed to encourage additional input and feedback from staff and customers as we move forward.
- An NCPP website is in development that will include information for both internal and external audiences.

REPORT | LISTENING SESSION SUMMARIES

Communications – Internal and External

Communications is the overarching issue for all categories in this report. Participants stressed the need for improved internal communications and indicated information is not getting to all those who need it. There is a definite lack of consistency in communication across the country and within states. Conservation partner leaders need to identify an effective and efficient mechanism to keep everyone informed of changes and opportunities in a timely manner.

Internal

There must be clear, consistent policy that is vetted with field staff before going forward. Furthermore, field employees need more instruction on all field tools and resources, including a comprehensive understanding of tool/resource usefulness and functionality, as well as adequate training timelines.

Clarification of roles and workflow in multi-partner projects is needed for improved customer experience. In addition, information needs to be distributed and received simultaneously across the entire conservation partnership.

External

Participants want communications materials and support that clearly articulate the benefits of conservation planning, targeted to both traditional and non-traditional clients. These materials should be tailored to address the natural resource benefits of planning instead of planning as a means to program funding.

Access to NRCS Tools and Information

Clear guidelines and step-by-step instructions need to be established for all conservation planning partners on a website or other locations to provide those who do not have access to the USDA network the information they need to do their job and stay informed. Such detailed instructions should include what authorizations and requirements are needed for each level of certification and should contain a clear process to follow if authorization access is denied.

Related NRCS information bulletins need to be translated in a clear, step-by-step format and distributed to the conservation partners.

Changes in Programs/Processes

Locally-led conservation should continue to be the priority guiding principle of the conservation planning efforts.

Field office staff and partners need to be able to improve their technical knowledge, receive training, gain certification/recertification, and access technical tools with minimal burden as a part of a more efficient process.

Supplemental compensation for district technicians would add incentives and allow for staff increases.

A structure/procedure should be created to allow for submissions of suggestions to improve tools/technology needs and technical ideas.

Streamlining the planning process is critical to be able to carry out the workload for both the planner and the producer. Pre-planning measures could include the following: creating a producer baseline prior to linking with FSA, encouraging Client Gateway utilization, allowing producers to submit a simple, draft start-up plan, etc.

Training and Mentoring

Make training a priority. Professional development should be streamlined, integrating technology, on-the-job training and field experiences that focus on all aspects of the conservation planning process. Training courses should be made available to all partners and offered at the local level when time and workload allow. Non-traditional methods of training should be explored. For example, on-site conservation plan development under a certified, veteran planner could be considered in place of formal classroom trainings. Individual Development Plans should be made available to all employees and partners to ensure courses are being offered on topics that are in demand.

Focus on mentorship. Experienced or retired conservation planners should be utilized to train and develop newer employees to understand and implement conservation planning.

Proficiency exams could be utilized as a potential strategy to assess training needs.

Workload/Efficiencies

Feedback from the participants made it clear the workload for conservation planning far outweighs the availability of partner staff to have the time to provide quality conservation technical assistance; organize and implement training; mentor staff; process contracts; and handle other program-related activities.

Clear direction is needed from conservation partner leaders on agency priorities when the conservation planning workload conflicts with program-related workload and other assigned duties. This is a significant issue where vacancies or a reduced workforce exists.

A more efficient process is needed to hire and onboard candidates quickly.

Conservation Planning Designation Requirements

Conservation planning certification requirements should be clearly defined and readily available for anyone seeking certification. The certification requirements should be consistently administered across the country and stable so that planners know what to expect in becoming certified.

Alternative methods of expediting certification should be considered for experienced but not yet certified planners. The development of a refresher course for existing certified planners should be explored as an option for planners to maintain certification. Consider additional resources for earning and maintaining certification, such as in-field conservation plan reviews by experienced planners.

Job Approval Authority (JAA)

Clearer guidelines are needed for JAA for planner certification, including the requirements for JAA, process for obtaining approval authority, how to advance through JAA levels, and coordination with conservation planning requirements, as well as where flexibility exists to offer JAA and how to track approvals.

Lapses in JAA/CP certification must be avoided, perhaps through automatically-generated notifications/warnings in the planner database.

Those who have JAA must be included in a database that is accessible to NRCS and district staff who may not be on the USDA network.

Conservation plans are not being approved quickly enough in some places. Engineers must be made more readily available to conservation planners.

The Field Office Technical Guide (eFOTG) must be the primary location for all designs, standards and documents rather than NRCS SharePoint, and must be accessible by those without access to federal computers.

Tools and Technologies

Many issues exist in data and access to data used for conservation planning. Listening session participants noted insufficient, incompatible or outdated data – especially soil survey data and real time aerial photography; inadequate high-speed internet access; antiquated technology (especially computers); lack of mobile technology; and a lack of integration between NRCS and FSA systems, tools and databases as major challenges in field offices across the nation.

FSA and NRCS need to use common data sets, specifically for field boundaries and CLU layers, which are currently only accessible by FSA and are not able to be edited by planners.

Access to modern and mobile technology, including drones, LIDAR, tablets with GPS capabilities, mobile tools in vehicles and hyperspectral imagery would improve efficiency and information for planning decisions.

Tools and data information need to be integrated, editable and accessible from a single platform attached to the planning land unit. A single interface is needed to improve efficiency and reduce errors regarding forms, data entry and form approval and must be user-friendly in the field with planners and farmers (visual, simple and clean).

Conservation plans must have the ability to identify fields as they are referred to by the producers, in addition to farm and tract numbers.

Efficiencies can be improved by automating processes, integrating all planning tools, and auto-populating forms with data.

Conservation Desktop can be made more efficient by creating maps using the 1155 instead of CIN; linking job sheets and fact sheets; and allowing job sheets to be signed by planners. The resource inventory checklist needs to be better integrated, streamlined and simplified.

Employees should be able to request changes or edits to tools that are then submitted to that tool's lead. A directory of who to contact when encountering problems with tools should be developed.

Field staff want to continue using third party data developed locally and at the state level, and job sheets and tools must have more flexibility to adapt locally.

Clarity is needed on how CART will work with conservation planning.

New participants should be able to apply for farm and tract numbers through Client Gateway, which needs to be made more user-friendly with a better format/layout and simplified access.

Staff should be able to enter basic information into SCIMS to start working with the producer, and FSA should establish linkage for these startup planning situations when setting up the producer.

Producers should also be able to download map snapshots through the Client Gateway with a custom map functionality feature. Once a tract is identified, data sets should be automatically linked.

Conservation Plan of the Future

Participants feel there is too much paperwork required to complete the plan, as well as too much irrelevant information (agency use only) contained in the producer's plan. Paperwork and job sheets need to be simplified and better integrated across planning tools (e.g., CP-52, Resource Concern Checklist and Rapid Resource Assessment) for planners, partners and producers.

Economic data of conservation planning is needed for producers to see the return on investment; however, staff do not have the training or resources needed to have these discussions. There is a need for a tool to be developed for economic data that would allow producers to see the feasibility of a project, as well as the payback period.

Quality Assurance

When conducting quality assurance reviews, use it as an opportunity to review staff's job approval authority.

Efficiency and effectiveness can be improved by reinstituting technical guide meetings, updating forms used by field offices and updating specifications with new technologies.

Policy

Training courses and IDP resources should be available for all partners.

A formal, effective and consistent mentoring program with experienced planners can provide valuable experience to aspiring planners.

Competency could be demonstrated and evaluated to ensure a planner's ability to run tools and find and treat resource concerns.

Rather than depending only on traditional training courses, partner with professional organizations to provide necessary resources and create refresher courses.

Tribal Connection

Participants suggested a process or alternative should be established to accept conservation plans developed by tribal resource professionals.

To create a stronger relationship and increase our understanding with Tribes, we need to provide tailored communications about our conservation practices and processes.

Additional Producer Feedback

Producers want less paperwork and more streamlined processes. This includes easier access for producers to review their records and paperwork electronically (e.g., username and password similar to banking system).

Producers are interested in funding opportunities for pilot projects and test plots that would allow them to learn (including learning by failure), adjust and improve in the future.